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Statement submitted by Make Mothers Matter, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is being issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Leave no mother behind: Empowered mothers are change makers that can make the SDGs succeed.

"Empowering women is not only a goal in itself.
It is a condition for building better lives for everyone on the planet."
United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, International Women's Day 2007

For mothers around the world, especially the poorest living in rural or remote areas, the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) bring big hopes for a better future for them, as well as for their children.

At the same time, Make Mothers Matter is convinced that empowering mothers can have wide ranging positive impacts, cutting across many Sustainable Development Goals. Indeed, empowering mothers means investing in children and families, and would be a high return on investment to advance the 2030 Agenda.

Mothers must be recognized as change makers, who, if only they are adequately supported and empowered, can be instrumental in the realization of many of these goals and targets.

Support mothers in breaking the cycle of poverty

Mothers and their children are disproportionately represented among the poorest and among the most vulnerable populations. As highlighted in the report that Magdalena Sepulveda, the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights presented to the United Nations General Assembly in October 2013, the unequal distribution of unpaid family care work and all its consequences is at the root of women's particular vulnerability to poverty and gender inequality. All over the world, mothers remain the main providers of unpaid care. This indispensable but invisible work, is performed in the homes, and includes domestic work and care of children, elderly and other dependent family members. Unpaid family care work sustains the wellbeing of families and communities, and subsequently supports the market economy. But in time, it also results in poverty, restricts mobility, and often impedes mothers' ability to seek employment or engage in income generating activities, maintaining many of them in poverty.

Addressing mother and child poverty is essential in order to break the cycle of poverty, and has the potential to end inter-generational poverty. The World Bank found that women reinvest an average of 90 per cent of their income in their families, vs. 30 per cent to 40 per cent for men.[1] Mothers are more likely to use their economic resources on food, education and health care for their children, thus creating a path out of poverty.

Addressing the unequal distribution of unpaid care work responsibility and empowering mothers is key to breaking the circle of poverty.

[1] The World Bank, Gender Equality as Smart Economics: A World Bank Action Plan, 2006.

Empower rural women in their multiple roles as household managers and caregivers, food producer and marketers to enhance food security and nutrition

Women make major contributions to the agricultural and rural economies in all countries, especially developing countries. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), women comprise on average 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, and account for an estimated two thirds of the world's 600 million poor livestock farmers. Many of them actually depend on agriculture as a primary source of income. In the least developed countries 79 per cent of economically active women, report agriculture as their primary source of livelihood. Mothers also often are engaged in subsistence farming and thus provide a huge amount of time and energy in ensuring nutrition and food security for their family.

But in their role as farmers, rural women remain discriminated against in terms of access to land, credit, and other productive resources such as access to seeds, fertilizers, information, training, etc. In addition, due to the lack of basic public infrastructures, the labour burden for rural women exceeds that for men as it includes a higher proportion of unpaid household responsibilities related to preparing food and collecting fuel and water.

Empowering rural women should be central to governments' action in relation to the 2030 Agenda. Policies should aim at supporting their multiple roles as household managers and caregivers, food producers and marketers, not to mention their role in nature conservation and climate adaptation. A gender sensitive development of public infrastructure and services is key to supporting rural women in these multiple roles and should be developed with them. Water and sanitation as well as electricity/energy are top priorities; but roads and transportation services, access to information and communication technology, schools, health-care centres, childcare and other care services are also important.

In rural areas, women should be regarded and thus supported in their multiple roles as mothers and farmers, and considered as change-makers for food security and improved nutrition.

Prioritize and invest in maternal health: healthy mothers can ensure healthy lives for their children

Pregnancy and childbirth continue to be life threatening for women. In 2015 an estimated 303,000 women died from related complications,[2] with 99 per cent of these deaths occurring in developing countries. Many more suffer from maternal morbidity, which leaves them with permanent consequences that can affect their physical, mental or sexual health, or even their cognition, mobility, status and participation in society. Pregnancy and childbirth are also the leading cause of death among the 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 who become pregnant each year. Behind these shocking statistics, there are also hundreds of thousands of children orphaned and in dire circumstances in these families.

[2] Trends in maternal mortality: 1990 to 2015 — Estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and the United Nations Population Division.

Most of these deaths and disabilities are preventable and these high numbers are simply not acceptable — Maternal mortality and morbidity is the ultimate discrimination faced by poor women and is the result of their lower social, economic, and health status.

On the other hand, the impact of mothers' physical and mental health on their children's health and development is now well documented. Adequate nutrition during pregnancy improves childbirth outcomes and affects child development in the womb. A growing body of evidence indicates that the first early years of a child's life, and in particular the "1001 critical days" from conception to age 2, are crucial for a child's long-term development and his future physical, emotional and mental health.[3] In particular, the earliest emotional experiences of a baby have a major impact on the development of its brain. Neuroscience has confirmed that problems that affect the child's health in this period, such as malnutrition and excessive stress, impair the child's physical and neurological development.

When mothers and caregivers are educated on the importance of hygiene, good nutrition, the relevance of the bond with the baby and on the impact of the stimulations he or she receives, they can actively contribute to their child's physical and emotional health and wellbeing.

Indeed, a preventive approach with a focus on mothers' education and mental health from the earliest days of pregnancy and giving support to the family to provide a safe, harmonious and stimulating environment to the child is a cost effective way to reduce mental and physical problems later in life. Child Early Education also has an important complementary role in supporting children's development.

Mothers and mothers-to-be who have the opportunity to meet with other mothers can educate, support and nurture each other. They can share knowledge and personal experience on a number of topics such as health, nutrition, etc., building social bonds and gaining confidence in themselves and their competences to raise their children. This is the aim of the workshops that Make Mothers Matter organizes, and of other such networks like Mama Cafes in the Netherlands. As another example, mother2mother in South Africa successfully trains, employs, and empowers mothers living with HIV to bring health and hope to other mothers, their families, and communities.

Educated and supported mothers can be change makers for their children's health and even for their own and other mothers' health.

Stop the intergenerational perpetuation of violence against women and empower mothers as agents of peace

Violence against women, domestic violence in particular, is widespread across all socioeconomic classes. Children experiencing domestic violence suffer emotional and psychological trauma, with negative physical and cognitive impact on their development. In addition, boys who witness their mothers' abuse are more likely to batter their female partners as adults, and girls grow up in the belief that threats and violence are the norm in relationships.

[3] 1001 critical days Manifesto, launched in the UK in 2013 — www.1001criticaldays.co.uk.

This vicious circle must be broken. Mothers must be supported to move from being a victim to standing for their rights and becoming part of the solution — for example through Human Rights Education.

Make Mothers Matter also upholds that peace awareness must be developed in the home from early childhood, and that mothers have a major role in teaching how to prevent violence and promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

"Change the world for girls, so that girls can change the world".[4] Ensure girls' education and end child marriages

It is widely acknowledged that education plays a key role in development, poverty eradication and ultimately peace; most mothers are well aware of its importance for their children.

The education of adolescent girls particularly, has the potential to end poverty — for themselves, their family and beyond. Girls should be able to go to school instead of staying home helping their mothers with unpaid care work, or being forced into early marriage.

Educated girls will become empowered mothers who in turn will have positive impact on their families, their communities and societies. They are the change makers of our future.

Therefore, Make Mothers Matter calls on Member States to give top priority to the fight against women's poverty and discrimination as the foundation for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Beyond the general measures and policies that can address poverty (like reforming national laws that discriminate — notably property and inheritance law, implementing social protection floors that include universal health coverage, etc.), Make Mothers Matter would like to make the following recommendations:

- Address unpaid care work through redistributive policies. Gender sensitive development of public infrastructure and services that reduce and redistribute domestic chores and care are essential for women's empowerment.
- Support rural women in their multiple roles. The largest dividends lie with them.
- Invest in maternal health, and give women and girls access to reproductive health care and education.
- Educate mothers and other primary caregivers on the importance of early child development — in particular the "1001 critical days" — and on their power to break the cycle of poverty.
- Ensure girls' access to education well beyond primary school. End child and early marriage.
- Engage men, in particular fathers in their caring role and promote shared responsibilities.

[4] The Girls effect — www.girleffect.org.

Empowering mothers and eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls produce what the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has rightly called a "double dividend": "Healthy, educated and empowered women have healthy, educated and confident daughters and sons".[5] The 2030 agenda is about "the future we want", and mothers and families can have significant impact on this future in multiple ways.

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[5] UNICEF, The State of the World's Children 2007: Women and Children – The Double Dividend of Gender Equality.